

Subjective Emptiness as a Link Between Sense of Self and Psychological Distress in Emerging Adults

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ABSTRACT – A coherent sense of self is central to psychological functioning, yet the experiential mechanisms linking self-structure to psychological distress are not well understood. This study examined subjective emptiness as a mediator of the association between sense of self and psychological distress in 82 young adults. Participants completed self-report measures of sense of self, subjective emptiness, and psychological distress. Mediation analyses with bootstrapped confidence intervals indicated that a weaker sense of self was associated with greater psychological distress and that this association was partially mediated by subjective emptiness. Symptom-specific analyses showed mediation for depressive and anxiety symptoms, but not somatic symptoms, suggesting affective specificity. Findings support subjective emptiness as a pathway linking self-structural vulnerability to psychological distress in emerging adults.

Keywords:

Sense of self; Subjective emptiness; Psychological distress; Depression; Anxiety; Self-structure; Emerging adulthood

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Introduction

A coherent sense of self is widely regarded as a foundational element of psychological functioning. Individuals who experience their self-concept as stable, integrated, and internally consistent tend to report greater emotional well-being, whereas disruptions in self-structure are associated with a broad range of psychological difficulties, including depression, anxiety, and general distress (Campbell et al., 1996; Flury & Ickes, 2007). Contemporary research continues to affirm the centrality of self-structure, demonstrating that constructs such as sense of self and self-concept clarity are linked to psychological adjustment across developmental stages and cultural contexts (Chen et al., 2024; McAdams & Olson, 2010; Xiang et al., 2023).

Despite evidence that a weak sense of self confers vulnerability to distress (Daughtry et al., 2022), less is known about the experiential processes through which self-structural vulnerabilities translate into subjective psychological suffering. Measures of sense of self and related constructs capture relatively abstract features of self-representation, whereas distress reflects lived affective experience. Identifying intermediary experiential states may therefore clarify how structural vulnerabilities of the self are expressed as emotional symptoms.

One experiential construct that may serve this bridging function is subjective emptiness. Emptiness has been described as a felt absence of inner substance, meaning, or emotional vitality, often accompanied by a sense of hollowness or internal disconnection (Hazell, 1984). Subjective emptiness can be conceptually distinguished from related constructs such as loneliness, anhedonia, or reduced meaning in life, insofar as it reflects a perceived absence of internal substance, continuity, or self-experience rather than deficits in social connection, pleasure capacity, or articulated life purpose (Hazell, 2003; Westen et al., 1992).

Although historically discussed in relation to borderline personality pathology (Poreh et al., 2006), recent work increasingly conceptualizes emptiness as a dimensional and transdiagnostic experience that varies across individuals and is meaningfully associated with psychological distress (Konjusha et al., 2021; Hopwood & Gjorgjieva, 2024). This conceptualization reflects a broader shift toward identifying experiential processes that cut across diagnostic categories (Mendoza Alvarez et al., 2025).

Sense of Self and Psychological Distress

A weak or poorly consolidated sense of self has been linked to emotional maladjustment. Early work on self-concept clarity and identity differentiation demonstrated associations with depression, anxiety, and emotional instability (Campbell et al., 1996; Diehl et al., 2001). More recent research has extended these findings, showing that self-structure continues to predict well-being longitudinally and prospectively, even when statistically controlling baseline distress (Xiang et al., 2023).

Within the individual differences literature, Flury and Ickes (2007) conceptualized sense of self as reflecting clarity, internal consistency, and confidence in self-definition, demonstrating that individuals with a weaker sense of self show greater interpersonal sensitivity and emotional vulnerability. Recent Daughtry et al. (2022) found that sense of self was a stronger predictor of psychological distress and adjustment than ego resiliency, suggesting that structural aspects of the self may anchor emotional functioning more fundamentally than adaptive coping capacities. Similarly, Bai (2022) demonstrated that self-concept clarity mediated the association between ego strength and self-esteem, highlighting the importance of coherent self-representation as a mechanism linking personality resources to psychological outcomes. These findings raise a key question: What experiential states transmit the effects of weakened self-structure to distress?

Subjective Emptiness as an Experiential Mechanism

Subjective emptiness is theoretically well positioned to serve as such a mechanism. Hazell (2003) conceptualized emptiness as an experiential state of inner void and existential concern, rather than as a disorder-specific symptom. Other theoretical work emphasized that emptiness reflects disruptions in identity, internal continuity, and meaning making (Kernberg, 1975; Westen et al., 1992). From this perspective, individuals with a weaker sense

of self may experience emptiness because they lack a stable internal framework that supports psychological continuity and meaning.

Recent empirical work supports this conceptualization. Contemporary measurement studies have developed and validated stand-alone self-report measures of subjective emptiness, reinforcing its status as a distinct experiential construct (Ermis-Demirtas et al., 2022; Price et al., 2022). Transdiagnostic investigations further indicate that emptiness is associated with internalizing distress and clinically significant outcomes across diagnostic groups (Konjusha et al., 2021; Pemau et al., 2024; Hopwood & Gjorgjieva, 2024). Qualitative research has also enriched the phenomenology of emptiness, characterizing it as a constellation of purposelessness, emotional numbing, and disconnection from self and others (Hudson et al., 2024).

Despite growing interest among researchers, emptiness has rarely been examined as a mediating process linking sense of self to psychological distress in nonclinical samples. Most studies treat emptiness as a correlate or descriptive feature rather than as a possible explanatory mechanism. Examining emptiness as a mediator may clarify how abstract vulnerabilities in self-structure are translated into lived psychological suffering.

Symptom-Domain Specificity

An additional unresolved issue concerns whether emptiness operates as a general distress mechanism or shows specificity for particular symptom domains. Broad, relatively common, experiences of distress can be described across at least three domains of experiences: depression, anxiety, and somatic (Govindasamy et al., 2020). Emptiness has been most consistently linked to depressive phenomenology, including demoralization, anhedonia, and meaninglessness (Hazell, 1984; Westen et al., 1992). However, emptiness may also contribute to anxiety by amplifying feelings of internal instability or lack of grounding (Lancer, 2019). In contrast, somatic symptoms may be less directly tied to self-experience and meaning, particularly in nonclinical populations where they tend to reflect physiological arousal or stress-related bodily complaints rather than disturbances in self-representation or identity (De Gucht & Fischler, 2002).

The Present Study and Hypotheses

The present study examined subjective emptiness as a mediator of the association between sense of self and psychological distress in a college sample composed primarily of emerging adults – a developmental period characterized by identity consolidation and heightened vulnerability to distress (Schwartz et al., 2014; Meca et al., 2015). By integrating structural and experiential perspectives, this study seeks to clarify how individual differences in self-structure are expressed as psychological symptoms. Three hypotheses were tested:

- H1.** A weaker sense of self will be associated with greater subjective emptiness and higher psychological distress.
- H2.** Subjective emptiness will partially mediate the association between sense of self and overall psychological distress.
- H3.** The mediating role of emptiness will be evident for affective symptoms (depression and anxiety) but not for somatization.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 82 undergraduate students (54 women, 25 men, 3 unidentified) recruited from a undergraduate social science courses. Ages ranged from 18 to 34 years ($M = 20.09$, $SD = 2.83$; $Mdn = 19$), representing a predominantly emerging-adulthood sample.

Participants completed a battery of self-report questionnaires as part of a larger study on self-experience and psychological functioning. Participation was anonymous and voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. All procedures were in accordance with ethical considerations and the Declaration of Helsinki. Participants received a small amount of extra course credit for participation.

Measures

Sense of Self. Sense of self was assessed using the 12-item Sense of Self Scale (SOSS; Flury & Ickes, 2007). Items assess the clarity, stability, and coherence of one's self-concept (e.g., feelings of internal consistency and certainty about oneself). Responses are made on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*). Items were summed to yield a total score, with higher scores indicating a weaker sense of self. The SOSS has demonstrated adequate internal consistency and construct validity in undergraduate samples (Flury & Ickes, 2007).

Emptiness. Subjective emptiness was measured using the 8-item Emptiness Scale (Hazell, 1984). The scale assesses experienced feelings of inner emptiness and existential concern. Items are rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*). Items were summed to create a total score, with higher scores reflecting greater experienced emptiness. The scale has demonstrated adequate internal consistency and convergent validity in nonclinical samples (Hazell, 1984). The scale has been used as a stand-alone measure of experienced emptiness rather than as a disorder-specific indicator.

Psychological Distress. Psychological distress was assessed using the Brief Symptom Inventory – 18 (BSI-18; Derogatis, 2001). The BSI-18 consists of 18 items assessing psychological symptoms experienced over the past seven days. Participants rate how much they were bothered by each symptom on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 (*Not at all*) to 4 (*Extremely*). The primary outcome was the Global Severity Index (GSI), calculated as the sum of all 18 items, with higher scores indicating greater overall psychological distress. In addition, the Depression, Anxiety, and Somatization subscales were examined in symptom-specific analyses. The scale demonstrates acceptable internal consistency and convergent validity with longer symptom inventories (Derogatis, 2001; Meachen et al., 2008).

Data Analysis

Preliminary analyses included descriptive statistics, internal consistency estimates, and zero-order correlations among study variables. Age and gender were examined for associations with the primary study variables to evaluate potential covariates.

The primary hypothesis that subjective emptiness mediates the association between sense of self and psychological distress was tested using regression-based mediation analysis with bootstrapped confidence intervals using the PROCESS macro (Model 4) for SPSS (Hayes, 2022). Indirect effects were estimated using 10,000 bootstrap samples, and 95% bias-

corrected confidence intervals were generated. An indirect effect was considered statistically significant when the confidence interval did not include zero.

The BSI-18 Global Severity Index served as the primary outcome. To examine symptom-domain specificity, parallel mediation models were estimated using the Depression, Anxiety, and Somatization subscales as outcomes. These analyses were conducted as exploratory theory-driven tests rather than as independent hypothesis tests. All statistical tests were two-tailed, and standardized coefficients are reported. Findings were significant if $p < .05$.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations among the study variables are presented in Table 1. All measures demonstrated acceptable to good internal consistency (Cronbach's α ranged from .838 to .930). Sense of self (weaker) was positively correlated with emptiness ($r = .65, p < .001$) and with overall psychological distress ($r = .62, p < .001$). Emptiness was also positively correlated with psychological distress ($r = .65, p < .001$).

Table 1: Descriptive statistics, internal consistencies, and zero-order correlations among primary study variables

Variable	1	2	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α
1. Sense of self			25.52	8.27	.838
2. Emptiness	.65		14.99	8.69	.912
3. BSI-18 total	.62	.65	14.39	13.72	.930

Note: $N = 82$. All correlations significant at $p < .001$

Age was not significantly associated with sense of self, emptiness, or BSI-18 totals ($r_s = .00$ to $.04, p_s > .745$). Women and men differed on BSI-18 total scores, $t(77) = 2.24, p = .028, d = 0.54$, but did not differ on sense of self or emptiness ($t_s < 0.45, p_s > .654$). As such, primary models were estimated without sociodemographics as covariates and then re-estimated controlling for gender to evaluate robustness.

Primary Mediation Model: Psychological Distress (BSI-18 GSI)

The mediation model (see Table 2) testing whether subjective emptiness mediated the association between sense of self and overall psychological distress (BSI-18 Global Severity Index) found the total effect of sense of self on psychological distress was significant ($\beta = .62, p < .01$). The direct effect of sense of self on psychological distress, controlling emptiness, remained significant ($\beta = .35, p < .01$). The indirect effect of sense of self on psychological distress through emptiness was significant ($\beta = .28$), with a 95% bootstrap confidence interval that did not include zero, CI [.043, .487], indicating partial mediation.

Symptom-Domain Specificity Analyses

To evaluate whether the indirect effect of emptiness generalized across symptom domains, parallel mediation models were estimated using the BSI-18 Depression, Anxiety, and Somatization subscales as outcomes. These results are summarized in Table 2.

For depressive symptoms, sense of self demonstrated a significant total effect ($\beta = .66, p < .01$). When emptiness was included in the model, the direct effect remained significant ($\beta =$

.35, $p < .01$). The indirect effect through emptiness was also significant ($\beta = .32$), with a 95% bootstrap confidence interval of [.107, .489], indicating partial mediation.

Table 2: Summary of mediation models examining emptiness as a mediator between sense of self and psychological distress outcomes

Outcome	Effect Total (c) β	Direct Effect (c') β	Indirect Effect (ab) β	95% Bootstrap CI for ab
BSI-18 GSI	.62**	.35**	.28	[.043, .487]
BSI-Depression	.66**	.35**	.32	[.107, .489]
BSI-Anxiety	.51**	.30*	.21	[.021, .417]
BSI-Somatization	.43**	.16	.27	[-.028, .509]

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

A similar pattern emerged for anxiety symptoms. Sense of self was significantly associated with anxiety ($\beta = .51$, $p < .01$), and the direct effect remained significant after accounting for emptiness ($\beta = .30$, $p < .05$). The indirect effect through emptiness was significant ($\beta = .21$), with a 95% bootstrap confidence interval of [.021, .417], indicating that emptiness partially mediated the association between sense of self and anxiety symptoms.

For somatic symptoms, sense of self demonstrated a significant total effect ($\beta = .43$, $p < .01$). However, the direct effect was not significant when emptiness was included ($\beta = .16$, $p > .05$), and the indirect effect through emptiness was not significant ($\beta = .27$), with a 95% bootstrap confidence interval that included zero [-.028, .509]. Thus, emptiness did not mediate the association between sense of self and somatization symptoms.

Robustness Check: Gender as Covariate

Because women and men differed on distress scores, the primary mediation model was re-estimated controlling for gender. The pattern and significance of direct and indirect effects were materially unchanged.

Discussion

The present study examined subjective emptiness as an experiential mechanism linking sense of self to psychological distress in a sample of predominantly emerging adults. Consistent with hypotheses, a weaker sense of self was associated with higher distress, and this association was partially mediated by subjective emptiness for overall psychological distress as well as affective symptom domains. These findings extend contemporary individual-differences research by identifying emptiness as a proximal experiential pathway through which self-structural vulnerabilities are translated into psychological symptoms. Emptiness may be particularly salient during emerging adulthood, a developmental period characterized by ongoing identity consolidation and heightened sensitivity to disruptions in self-coherence (Meca et al., 2015).

Emptiness as a Mechanistic Bridge

The results support theoretical models proposing that disturbances in self-structure give rise to experiential deficits that directly contribute to emotional suffering (Kernberg, 1975). Individuals with a weaker sense of self reported greater subjective emptiness, which in turn was associated with elevated distress. This pattern aligns with recent findings suggesting that self-structural constructs exert effects on psychological outcomes through intermediary self-representational processes (Bai, 2022; Daughtry et al., 2022).

By modeling emptiness as a mediator, the present study advances the literature by identifying a phenomenologically proximal state that bridges self-structure and symptom expression. Emptiness appears to capture the lived experience of internal absence or disconnection that translates abstract self-vulnerability into affective distress.

Symptom-Domain Specificity

Mediation effects were observed for depressive and anxiety symptoms but not for somatization, indicating meaningful symptom-domain specificity. This pattern suggests that emptiness is most relevant for affective forms of distress, which are closely tied to internal experience and meaning, rather than for somatic complaints. The absence of mediation for somatization strengthens confidence that emptiness is not merely a marker of all domains of generalized symptom reporting or depression.

Recent transdiagnostic research similarly emphasizes that emptiness is particularly associated with internalizing distress and clinically consequential outcomes, including suicidal ideation (Konjusha et al., 2021; Pemaui et al., 2024; Hopwood & Gjorgjieva, 2024). Qualitative work further supports this interpretation, highlighting experiential themes of purposelessness and emotional numbing that align closely with affective symptomatology (Hudson et al., 2024).

Developmental and Applied Implications

Emerging adulthood is a period marked by identity exploration and consolidation, rendering self-structure vulnerabilities especially salient (Schwartz et al., 2014). Within this developmental context, subjective emptiness may function as an early experiential signal of risk for affective distress. Although the present sample was nonclinical, the findings converge with clinical research (Miller et al., 2020) positioning emptiness as a severe and consequential experience across diagnostic categories.

From an applied perspective, these findings suggest that interventions targeting subjective emptiness—by strengthening self-coherence, internal continuity, or meaning—may hold promise for alleviating affective distress. Emptiness may represent an accessible therapeutic target that links abstract self-structural vulnerabilities to concrete symptom experiences.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations to the current study should be noted. The cross-sectional design limits causal inference, and longitudinal studies are needed to establish temporal ordering among sense of self, emptiness, and distress. The reliance on self-report measures raises potential concerns about reporting bias and method variance; however, the differentiated symptom pattern partly mitigates this concern. The modest sample size warrants caution limiting ability

to identify smaller effects. Symptom-specific analyses should be interpreted as tests of mechanistic specificity rather than independent hypothesis tests.

Future research should use larger, diverse samples to extend the present findings. Future research also could examine emptiness longitudinally and in conjunction with adjacent constructs such as self-concept clarity, meaning in life, and loneliness within integrated models. Considering that emptiness has been described as relational issues with self and others (Miller et al., 2020), influences of concerns such as loneliness and shyness, which may mediate distress and behavioral social practice (Bai, 2025), might be examined. Continued refinement of emptiness measurement and its placement within transdiagnostic frameworks will further clarify its role in psychological functioning.

Conclusion

In sum, the present study provides evidence that subjective emptiness partially mediates the association between sense of self and affective psychological distress in emerging adults. By integrating structural and experiential perspectives, these findings contribute to contemporary models of individual differences and underscore the importance of examining phenomenological mechanisms that link self-structure to psychological distress.

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